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SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA

ALSO FOR A A/S WARLICK

P FOR DRUSSELL, RRANGASWAMY

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NSC FOR MCDERMOTT, SHAPIRO

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TAGS: PREL PGOV PTER UNSC MARR MOPS LE SY

SUBJECT: LEBANON: HIZBALLAH AND AOUN ARE CONCERNS,
ARCHBISHOP AUDI AND PATRIARCH SFEIR TELL FELTMAN, SHAPIRO

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Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) In a March 8 meeting with Greek Orthodox Archbishop Ilias Audi, NEA Acting A/S Feltman, NSC Senior Director for the Middle East and North Africa Dan Shapiro, and the Ambassador heard Audi express his wish for an independent and sovereign Lebanon, but also his significant doubts about the future. A A/S Feltman emphasized that the purpose of his trip to Lebanon was to bring a "basic message" that the Obama Administration strongly supports Lebanese sovereignty, and that U.S. engagement with Syria will not be at Lebanon's expense.

¶2. (C) Audi expressed concern about a possible March 8/Aoun victory in the June 7 parliamentary elections. He accused opposition Christian leader Michel Aoun of "wanting to be Syrian," without realizing he is being used by the Syrians and his Hizballah allies in March 8. Audi noted Hizballah's strength and deeper encroachment into Lebanon's multicultural system. A A/S Feltman expressed the importance of a March 14 victory to help maintain the strong support for Lebanon in Washington.

¶3. (C) In a separate meeting later the same day, Maronite Patriarch Sfeir expressed concern about the outcome of June elections, saying the opposition was working hard to win. He noted that Christians were divided but said President Sleiman was "managing" the opposing factions. Sfeir also highlighted money flows into the country before elections. A A/S Feltman asked Sfeir to spread the message to his Christian followers that the U.S. supported Lebanon and U.S. rapprochement with Syria would not endanger the U.S. strong support of Lebanon. End Summary.

AUDI: WHERE ARE WE GOING?

¶4. (C) On March 8, NEA Acting A/S Jeffrey Feltman, NSC Senior Director for the Middle East and North Africa Dan Shapiro, and the Ambassador, accompanied by PolOff and senior political LES, met Archbishop Ilias Audi at his downtown Bishropy. Audi quickly declared his gratitude for strong

U.S. support of Lebanon, but confessed that some feared the Obama Administration's attempt to develop better relations with Syria would come at Lebanon's expense. Audi said "the neighbors" (Syria) are happy, but they still believe Lebanon will come "under their umbrella." Audi was adamant that Lebanon could govern itself, it appreciated freedom, and "suffered" when not free.

15. (C) Audi, praising the multiculturalism and plethora of universities in Lebanon, cautioned that Christian Lebanese are wondering where the country is going. Referring to Hizballah, he noted many Lebanese see its growing power on the ground and are worried. A A/S Feltman expressed that the U.S. shares the same fear adding, "We do not want Iran to own Lebanon."

LEBANON 101:
THE MESSAGE IS CLEAR

16. (C) A A/S Feltman underscored the Obama Administration's very strong commitment to Lebanon. "You have seen it through U.S. action," he remarked, noting U.S. funding for the Special Tribunal on Lebanon and support for the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), noting LAF Commander Jean Kahwagi's recent successful week long trip to the U.S. A A/S Feltman said his and Shapiro's trip to Damascus was meant to send a clear and basic message to let "Lebanon be run by Lebanese," and that even though groups will try to exploit U.S. overtures to Syria as selling out Lebanon, the U.S. would remain steadfast. Feltman explained that President Obama and Secretary Clinton sent him to begin a "sustained and principled dialogue" with Syria, but one not dedicated simply to lengthy negotiating processes, but to results. Audi

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approved of the dialogue with Syria, but not at Lebanon's expense, he emphasized. A A/S Feltman appealed to Audi to speak confidently, in his "messages" of U.S. commitment to Lebanon.

HIZBALLAH AND AOUN:
LOVE HIM AND LEAVE HIM

17. (C) On election outcomes, Audi professed that Lebanese politics is conducted in "back rooms," and noted that Christian opposition leader Michel Aoun wants to "be Syrian," and "have power anyway he can get it." Relating Aoun's search for power and his alliance with Hizballah, Audi believed Hizballah was using Aoun, and if March 8 took power, Aoun would be tossed aside and "go to France." A A/S Feltman asked Audi what could be done to prevent a sizable Aoun vote.

Audi had no suggestions, and recounted comments made to him by Aoun supporters asking, essentially, who else do they have to vote for?

ELECTIONS:

18. (C) A A/S Feltman spoke of difficulties in maintaining the current level of U.S. support for Lebanon if March 8 wins. A A/S Feltman expressed optimism over the election to Audi on what he believed was a better organized March 14, but with the election outcome too close to call, Audi responded "no" to A A/S Feltman's question on Michel Murr, a Greek Orthodox, possibly "delivering" the election to March 8. Audi was unsure about the prospect of violence erupting before the election if March 8 perceived it was losing.

DID I MENTION HIZBALLAH?

19. (C) Audi spoke dejectedly about Hizballah's power and the "spaces in Lebanon where no one dares enter." He said Hizballah was buying land, "little by little," and he speculated that many Lebanese really wanted Hizballah to

stay. He cautioned that Hizballah is Iranian and uses the Lebanese for its gain. Audi pondered how could Hizballah be so strong as to not have been defeated by Israel in the 2006 war. Audi observed that during the war, Israel would bomb Beirut or Jouneh, but it could not finish off Hizballah. Shapiro asked if Audi truly believed Israel wanted Hizballah to remain in power. Audi could only reply that what happened in 2006 made no sense to him.

PATRIARCH SFEIR:
WHERE IS HIS VOICE?

¶10. (C) Audi countered A A/S Feltman's observance that Maronite Patriarch Sfeir was good at crafting a message to Christian voters on Lebanese sovereignty, saying Sfeir was easy to attack by the opposition, and that Sfeir "really does not say much." (Note: On March 5, a group of Lebanese church leaders launched a charter calling for regulation of political conduct in Lebanon. The document called for voters to choose freely, candidates who are "ethical and qualified." End Note.) In A A/S Feltman and NSC Senior Director Shapiro's meeting with the Patriarch later that day, Sfeir agreed to spread A A/S Feltman's message of U.S. support for Lebanon.

¶11. (C) Sfeir was hesitant about the outcome of elections, saying that "they" -- mentioning Saudi Arabia and Iran -- are paying money to influence the results. A A/S Feltman reiterated that Lebanese elections should occur without interference, but the Patriarch opined that stopping Syrian interference in elections was difficult.

¶12. (C) According to Sfeir, March 8 is doing "everything" to win the elections. A A/S Feltman stressed that Hizballah and Aoun were "putting Lebanon at risk." A A/S Feltman noted Lebanon's progress since his departure, including the selection of a president. Sfeir said President Michel Sleiman currently was "managing" the March 14 and opposition

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sides. Sfeir thanked A A/S Feltman and Shapiro for the strong U.S. support for Lebanon.

¶13. (U) NEA Acting Assistant Secretary Jeffrey D. Feltman and NSC Senior Director for the Middle East and North Africa Daniel Shapiro have cleared this message.
SISON